



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

Early Weaning: Part 1 of 3

Wean Early Without Working Overtime

This first in a three-part series considers how cow-calf producers can benefit from the feed efficiency and higher quality grades of early-weaned calves.

by *Laura Nelson*

Weaning calves at half the typical age calls for re-thinking your calendar, but it doesn't obligate a management overhaul. With a few key tweaks, ranchers already weaning at home can reap the rewards of calves that gain faster, convert cheaper, perform better and reduce cow costs.

"We started weaning calves early because of drought," says Ruminant Nutritionist Jeff Heldt. "Now we do it because it makes sense from a cow feed-cost and grass-availability standpoint."

Heldt, a field consultant for Land O'Lakes Purina Feed, works with cattlemen in the western portions of Nebraska and South Dakota who have moved their weaning date toward a 90-day target. The result? An average savings of \$40 per cow in feed costs and 25% increase in forage availability.

"You can't feed a more efficient beef animal than one that is 100 to 200 days of age," Heldt says. "If you're feeding calves clear

out to finish, you can really take advantage of this in the areas of feed efficiency and carcass quality. In an early-weaning program, these two things are going to be money makers."

It works; that's proven. But don't jump in without careful evaluation on your own terms. Marketing, facilities and management plans must be in order to avoid weaning sooner than you or the calves are ready.

Market planning

Like some of Heldt's customers, Brush, Colo., rancher Justin Curtis weaned his first set of 90-day-old calves when faced with sparse forage.

"We make those decisions year-to-year based on what we have in the pasture. In those really dry years on native grass, pulling the calf off sure helped the cow keep weight on and helped cut back on the feed bill," he says.

Calves went directly to the Certified



Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Chappell (Neb.) Feedlot, where owner-manager Tom Williams says resource evaluation is crucial.

"Out in that high desert country, they don't always have the resources available to support a cow and a nursing calf. So getting the calf off and into the yard right away works — but it wouldn't fit everyone," the Nebraska manager says.

Heldt recommends starting with a marketing goal. Unless a feedlot is prepared to take on a 350-pound (lb.) calf, he says the early-weaning model best suits ranchers who already wean and background calves. For them, there are two options: sell a heavier calf at normal marketing time, or target a

► **Above:** "These little calves are so efficient and can gain so rapidly that a person can overshoot a finish quicker than expected," says Jeff Heldt. "So the end marketing date or weight needs to be thought of first, then back-calculate the performance."

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normal finished weight but hit the market before prices are saturated with cattle from traditional programs.

Finishing the long-fed animal takes experience, however.

“These little calves are so efficient and can gain so rapidly that a person can overshoot a finish quicker than expected,” Heldt says. “So the end marketing date or weight needs to be thought of first, then back-calculate the performance.”

Running accurate projections can be difficult without background data, too, but Heldt recommends plugging in a 4:1 to 5:1 conversion rate of feed to gain.

“You’re going to spend a little more money feeding calves that you normally don’t spend,” he says. “But you’re gaining an advantage on feed efficiency and weight gain. At the same time, your cow is gaining weight and she’s eating 25% less feed — that has a significant dollar value as well.”

Considering facilities

Whether you’re considering drylot weaning or separating pairs along a pasture division, Williams says facilities need to revolve around one thing: “A really good fence.”

Heldt agrees. “It sounds simple, but you just have to walk through every place those cattle are going to be and think, ‘Is this appropriate for an animal half the size of what I’m normally dealing with?’ Look at the feedbunks, the water; can they reach it? Look at the fence; can they crawl under or through it?”

In the feedlot and in his own herd, Williams weans 90- to 120-day-old calves.

“Their size creates a little extra work,” he says. “If you put 150 head in a pen that would usually hold 150 six-weights, they’re like little



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ants to keep in.”

Pens at Chappell are fenced into smaller areas to keep calves closer to feedbunks, and an extra bunk cable keeps them from crawling through. Plywood or metal in the bottom of the bunks elevate feed to make it easier to reach.

A fenceline is certainly important, but it doesn’t have to be a fenceline feedbunk.

“Fenceline weaning these young calves is a pretty ideal situation — there’s no reason you can’t accomplish the same gain out on pasture with the right supplements,” Heldt says. “Leave the calf on the pasture he came from with a supplement or self-feeder, put mom elsewhere, and let those calves stay home and perform; you really don’t need to bring them into a drylot.”

With extra considerations, Heldt says early weaning should be business as usual. “I ought to have a plan in place regardless of when I’m weaning or what age I’m weaning at,” he points out.

Williams says the bottom line is simple: “Weaning at home takes a little bit of skill and knowledge, no matter what age the calf is. We’ve got to have open lines of communication between the cattlemen, their vet and us here at the feedlot to make sure we’re taking care of that animal and maximizing its profit potential from start to finish.”



Editor’s Note: *Laura Nelson is an industry information specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

Early Weaning: Part 2 of 3

Food for Thought

Nutritional considerations for early-weaned calves.

by **Laura Nelson**

Meeting the nutritional needs of a young calf might sound familiar to parents of young children: feed well, feed often and prepare for pickiness.

Weaning at 90 to 120 days of age has proved to be an effective tool to maximize feed efficiency and stimulate marbling

development, but that comes with added nutritional responsibility.

Cargill Animal Nutrition Beef Specialist Bryan McMurry lays it out: “Early-weaned calves have marginally functional rumens compared to a calf weaned at 200 days, which means less-than-optimal digestion of

feedstuffs for the early-weaned calf,” he says. “As a result, feeds used in their diets must be high-quality and highly digestible.”

Early-weaned calves have smaller rumens, less intake capacity and fewer microbes to digest feed than older weanlings.

“They can’t eat very much, so every little